

# Sex Education

by Mike Fortune-Wood

Sex education is in the news again and is as contentious as ever. One thing that stands out in the current debate is that both teachers and parents find covering this issue difficult. Teacher training is scarce and ill thought out, as a result of which teachers find it difficult and embarrassing. Parents tend to fare no better.

There is little surprise that parents find it difficult to cover the issue since many are poorly informed themselves, due to their own poor sex education. The assumption that because parents are parents they must have a working knowledge of the subject is false. The Family Planning Association reported that in one survey a third of adults thought exercise, douching or urinating after sex could stop fertilisation and 89% did not realise sperm could live inside a woman's body for up to seven days<sup>1</sup>. This does not even begin to examine the issues of STDs and birth control.

The central debate in the media seems to be on three principle issues; when should one begin sex education, what should one cover and what are the long term effects. None of which have easy answers.

One recent new course, developed by the Medical Research Council and NHS Health Scotland called SHARE "Sexual health and relationships: safe, happy and responsible" aimed to reduce teenage pregnancies. The five day £900 programme was aimed at teaching 13-15 year olds using videos, group work and role-play.

But hopes for the effectiveness of the course were dashed last month with a report in the British Medical Journal when Marion Henderson, a researcher for the MRC in Glasgow, compared rates of pregnancies and abortions of over 4,000 young women aged 15 to 20. Half took part in trials of the new programme, and half received traditional sex education.

The study found pregnancy rates were the same in both groups, at 1:3. Abortions were also the same with 1:8 having at least one termination.

"Sadly, what this tells us is we haven't made a difference to NHS recorded conceptions or terminations. The fact that just under half of all conceptions ended up in abortions suggest they weren't planned or wanted," said Dr Henderson.

At least one in five of all young at least one pregnancy over the were monitored, with one in 10 termination. "That's a huge cost and also for the health services,"

The conclusions were that the factor for early pregnancy was women from well off families abort an early pregnancy.

**Sex education advice**  
**AVERT International**  
[www.avert.org/sexedu.htm](http://www.avert.org/sexedu.htm)  
**The National Children's Bureau**  
[www.ncb.org.uk/](http://www.ncb.org.uk/)  
**RU thinking about it**  
[www.ruthinking.co.uk/](http://www.ruthinking.co.uk/)  
**NHS direct**  
[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/questions/category/index.aspx?categoryId=57](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/questions/category/index.aspx?categoryId=57)

women in the study had five-year period they having at least one for these young women, said Dr Henderson.

strongest determining poverty, though young were more likely to

So how about teaching young people abstinence? Well this is what they have been doing in the USA supported by President Bush. However a study of the results have shown that it has made not one jot of difference to the young people's behaviour and since the scheme did not teach about birth control or STDs it has put many thousands of children's lives at risk.<sup>2</sup>

In another report the Institute for Public Policy Research suggests that waiting until children are 13 or 14 is just too late and suggests that sex education should be compulsory for primary children.

This report notes that at 26 per 1000 the UK has the highest birth rate among teenagers in Europe, 20% ahead of its nearest rival (Latvia) and four times that of the lowest levels (Cyprus, Slovenia, Sweden and Denmark) and that the percentage of those children under the age of consent (16) who are sexually active is now around 25%.

There have also been contradictory stories about early pregnancies. On the one hand the DfES are reported<sup>3</sup> as claiming some success, saying that teenage pregnancy rates have actually fallen by 11% since Labour came to power in 1997, while in another story<sup>4</sup> it is reported that "The government is struggling to meet its 2010 target of halving teenage pregnancy rates, which have risen by almost 12% over the past decade". Clearly both cannot be true.

The government acknowledges their failure to have had any effect in reducing under age sex by planning to make pregnancy tests, the morning after pill and, ultimately, abortions available to young people in school without the knowledge of their parents.

In a report by OFSTED children themselves say that parents and teachers are poor at explaining issues of sexuality and that many children get their advice from magazines. While some magazines are useful the information is patchy and often unsuitable for younger children. School nurses are also cited as being useful in offering non-judgemental advice. Of course home educated children don't have access to school nurses.

While many HE parents make a real attempt to provide sex education it seems that many HE children get advice from the many peer networks available to them, advice which is often of a poor quality.

Finally another report says that of nearly 4,000 13-15 year olds questioned 25% said they had had sex and that most did not use a condom the first time, although 55% did do so subsequently. Other reports by the Family Planning Association, however, suggest that even when teenagers did use condoms they were used ineffectively (used either too late, removed too soon or put on wrongly).

Professor Wallace said, "Much of the teaching in schools is too biologically-based. Teachers should be trained how to teach teenagers skills so they can negotiate effectively, handle condoms and access services. The teen pregnancy crisis will only be resolved when pupils are given sex and relationship education that equips them with the knowledge and skills to inform their choices." She added that parents also need training on how to educate their children about sex to help overcome their own embarrassment.

In March Channel 4 broadcast a documentary about sex education in the Netherlands<sup>4</sup> called, "let's talk sex" presented by Davina McCall.

In the programme children are shown explicit shots of adults engaged in sex. While Channel 4 insists that its purpose is to stimulate discussion the programme inevitably caused more than a little concern from some circles.

The problem for anyone trying to draw any conclusions from the explicit nature of the show and the low rates of teen pregnancy in the Netherlands is that methods in the Netherlands are as varied as anywhere else.

While parents in the Netherlands seem more relaxed and open in their attitude towards discussions with children about sexuality from a very early age, in the UK only the reproductive biology and sexual health issues are compulsory to teach in schools. Important relationship issues are often not covered at all and where they are parents have the right to withdraw children from the non- science parts of the subject.

The professional advice coming from those organisations working with young mothers and fathers is to talk to young people well before they are sexually active, either individually or in very small groups, and to direct the discussion towards the particular child's experiences and personal development. In short what is needed is to use the methods home educators are aware work so well in other educational arenas, personalising the experience.

Home educating parents should follow their own best practice and actively consider what they intend to do about sex education; ignoring it just because it's embarrassing is unacceptable.

There are websites and books available which guide parents as to where to make a start and there are plenty of books available for the children themselves, even for the very young such as the excellent and hilarious book *Mummy Laid an Egg* by Babette Cole, a picture book ideally suited to breaking down that awkward stage, trying to think how to begin.

Whatever home educating parents decide to do it is clear that we in the UK now live in a highly sexualised society where ignorance is no defence to pregnancy or STDs. It seems sensible to consider that children's best chance of avoiding being exploited by others and making informed decisions is for them to have at least an accurate working knowledge of the issues.

1 [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6347621.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6347621.stm)

2 [education.guardian.co.uk/schoolsworldwide/story/0,,2058181,00.html?gusrc=rss&feed=8](http://education.guardian.co.uk/schoolsworldwide/story/0,,2058181,00.html?gusrc=rss&feed=8)

3 [education.guardian.co.uk/sexeducation/story/0,,1929194,00.html](http://education.guardian.co.uk/sexeducation/story/0,,1929194,00.html)

4 [education.guardian.co.uk/sexeducation/story/0,,1866111,00.html](http://education.guardian.co.uk/sexeducation/story/0,,1866111,00.html)

5 [education.guardian.co.uk/sexeducation/story/0,,2041442,00.html](http://education.guardian.co.uk/sexeducation/story/0,,2041442,00.html)

**Some books that have received good reviews include:**

*Mummy Laid an Egg* by Babette Cole, published by Red Fox Picture Books

*Let's Talk About Sex* by Robie H. Harris

*The Period Book: Everything You Don't Want to Ask (But Need to Know)*

by Karen & Jennifer Gravelle

*Growing Up: It's a Girl Thing* by Mavis Jukes

*Living with a Willy* by Nick Fisher & Harry Venning